

## **On-the-Scene in Atlanta, Georgia - Update from NFA Superintendent Dr. Denis Onieal Concerning Fire Fighter Deployment (9/8/05)**

Hi Mike (and others)

FEMA sent me down here to Atlanta to deal with the situation – the firefighters that are upset, the issues and the processes. Here's the scoop as straight as a truckie can put it.

The issues are being resolved. We've sent out almost 1300 firefighters on deployments and are processing them in and out as quickly as humanly possible. We have about an additional 2400 or so in the system, either on their way to Atlanta or in Atlanta.

There are complaints.

When I first got here (Monday night) it was a hostile situation - kind of like an IAFF meeting when the contract expired last year and negotiations are going nowhere. The principal concerns were:

*- I'm a firefighter, I don't want training, I don't want anything - send me out to do firefighting...*

The answer is that we were very clear that these folks were being asked to do "non-operational community relations work..." I wrote that. There were some folks that didn't read that, and others who thought that we should change the mission because of their qualifications. We were clear with them on what they were supposed to do. It is what is desperately needed.

In order to "process" them into the system, there were three things needed - they had to be registered and given inoculations (because of the health concerns), they had to be given a cell phone registered to them and a credit card registered to them, they had to be given information (trained) in what they are supposed to do.

That takes time. The folks who had done wildland work understood that this process takes time, but the first-timers to this kind of operation didn't - so that was frustrating.

As I write (thurs afternoon) we are on a three day process of intake, training and deploy. The issue right now is communications – keeping everyone informed as to where we are in the deployment process.

When we called for assistance from the fire service, we had no idea that people were going to be evacuated to places all over the country - but they are. We need community relations folks there too, and these ffs are being deployed there as well. We are trying to adapt to those quickly changing circumstances.

The book on this kind of operation hasn't been written, we're flying by the seat of our pants trying to help as many people as we can. I spend most of my day talking with ffs, checking on their deployment status, kicking butt to get them out of here, dealing with their issues and thanking the ffs for their patience and understanding.

I cannot tell you how great they are. They are simply wonderful - I just think they needed someone down here to speak their language.

A total of 13 people out of all these thousands actually left in disgust. I've seen 2 of those 13 on the television news!

I can assure you that I'm taking notes, that we will review this whole operation to see what it is we can do if this ever (hopefully never) happens again.

You have my personal promise that I will do everything I can to the best of my ability, for as long as it takes, to ensure that your and everyone's ffs are taken care of and treated the way they should be. Mostly I'm asking for a little patience and understanding, and am getting it.

The big issues (at least from what I see) are being resolved through better communications. The issues that I'm dealing with now are admin questions about pay, length of deployment, what about this, what about that.

Hope this clarifies some of the rumors for everyone. Overall, this mission is a pretty impressive story of epoch proportions.

denis